

Are Sino-US relations really comparable to the WWI-era Anglo-German rivalry?



Imperial Germany's rivalry with Britain is often used as an analogy to explain the contemporary US-China relationship. [Kate Epstein](#) explains why this interpretation of the past is based on an outdated draft of history, and what new questions might be asked based on more recent research.

One of today's premier strategic challenges is the Sino-US relationship. When analysts turn to history seeking perspective on navigating this challenge, the analogy most often [employed](#) is the Anglo-German relationship before the First World War. Like Germany at the turn of the century, the logic runs, China is now a rising economic and naval power challenging the declining global economic and naval hegemon—Great Britain then, the United States now. Just as Britain had to abandon global reach in order to concentrate on the emerging threat across the North Sea, so the United States must now pivot to the Pacific.

However, the scholarship on which contemporary analysts tend to rely for their understanding of the historical side of the analogy is dated. When their footnotes are scrutinized, the road typically leads through [Paul Kennedy's work](#) back to that of Arthur Marder, an American historian whose path-breaking books on the pre-war Royal Navy, published in [1940](#) and [1961](#), established key elements of the conventional narrative of British naval and strategic policy during this period. These included the primacy of the German threat; the centrality of the “dreadnought revolution” and the Anglo-German “arms race”; and the abandonment of imperial defense in order to concentrate forces in home waters.

There is no doubting that Marder's work was seminal. But his research was far more limited than is generally realized. On a crucial research trip to the Admiralty Record Office in 1938, when he gathered the evidence that informed his understanding of the pre-war era in all his subsequent work, his time was limited to four weeks, he was not given the freedom to consult any records he wished, and he was obliged to use vague citations. As a result, his work fails to meet three basic conditions for sound scholarship: sufficient time in key archives, intellectual freedom to ask questions and follow the evidence where it leads, and accurate footnoting.

Beginning in the 1970s, a new draft of pre-war British naval history began to be developed which does meet these conditions. Since then, two historians—[Jon Sumida](#) and Nicholas Lambert—have produced a body of scholarship that rests on a far broader and deeper evidentiary base than Marder's. In addition to their unparalleled command of the Admiralty records, they have undertaken extensive research in non-naval archives. The quantitative and qualitative gap between their research and Marder's is so great that any attempt to reconcile their work with Marder's into a “post-revisionist” synthesis betrays a misunderstanding of the nature of the literature. Thus, it would be a mistake to think of them as offering a “revisionist” take on Marder's “orthodox” version.

The interpretation of pre-war British naval and strategic history developed by Sumida and Lambert differs fundamentally from Marder's. Not only do the former treat the technical aspects of the subject with greater precision than the latter, they also place it in broader context. Where Marder emphasized battleship construction and operational redeployment as the centerpieces of naval policy, Sumida and Lambert lay greater stress on state finances, domestic politics, public-private partnerships, and the character of the global economic system.

From this loftier vantage point, Sumida and Lambert find that the Admiralty did not give up on imperial defense to concentrate on the North Sea, but rather that it remained committed to global reach. While the Admiralty certainly regarded Germany as an emerging threat, it continued to see France and Russia as equal or greater threats for longer than Marder allowed. Lambert in particular shows how the Admiralty believed it could maintain Britain's relative power by leveraging continued British dominance—undiminished by industrialization—over the infrastructure of the global trading system. Together, Sumida and Lambert show that while Britain was a declining power in certain respects, its global hegemony remained uncontested in others.

There are two takeaway points here. The first is that if analysts want to consult history for perspectives on current events, they need to pay attention to the scholarly quality of the processes used by historians to reach their conclusions—not simply to the rhetorical usefulness of the conclusions. *What* historians say matters little if *how* they come to say it is fundamentally flawed. Put crudely, what is the intellectual utility of erroneous history?

The second takeaway point is that changes to the back half of a historical analogy should lead to changes in the front half. If the understanding of the Anglo-German relationship on which the analogy to the Sino-US relationship is based rests on an outdated draft of history, what new questions about the Sino-US relationship might be asked based on the best current draft of history? For starters, perhaps contemporary analysts should be thinking not only in terms of US decline but also in terms of how the United States can leverage its continuing strengths. In addition, they might think less in purely military terms and more in terms of domestic politics (would the homefront remain unified in a war with China or splinter into interest groups?), budgets (what will Americans realistically support relative to other fiscal priorities?), and the structure of the global economic system (what will happen to US factories, to say nothing of neutrals' factories, which rely on global supply chains when the global economy is deranged—as it would be in a US war with China?).

Like any body of scholarship, the best available draft of pre-war British naval and strategic history cannot answer these questions. And time alone will tell whether Sumida and Lambert are correct. But they have provided more than enough evidence to show that Marder's interpretation cannot be correct. For any analyst or policymaker hoping to gain perspective from studying the past, their draft offers a better starting point than the draft currently in use.

Note: the above draws on the author's [published work](#) in *International Affairs*.

About the Author



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